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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MONTREAL 000476

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SUBJECT: MONTREAL ANTI-WAR DEMONSTRATORS COALITION OF  
LABOR AND ACTIVIST GROUPS; SIZE OF MARCH 16  
DEMONSTRATION QUESTIONED

REF: QUEBEC 00051

1. SUMMARY: Quebecers have traditionally been known for anti-war sentiment; in the lead-up to the current war in Iraq, polling data, media coverage and the largest demonstrations in Canada have indicated that pacifism is alive and well in the province. But the picture of Quebec pacifism presented in the last several months is probably more complicated than a simple outgrowth of a historical tradition. Echec a la guerre, the coalition group that has organized all of the large anti-war demonstrations in Montreal since January, is comprised primarily of social action and labor groups. Many of these same people and groups were active in protesting against globalization at the Quebec City Summit of the Americas in 2001. Interestingly, evidence has come to light recently that the size of the Montreal demonstrations, which were reported to have drawn participants in the 100,000 to 200,000 range, may have been considerably exaggerated. END SUMMARY

2. A Lger Marketing poll conducted March 19-23 is one of many highlighting Quebec's anti-war views. While Ontarians were equally divided as to whether or not the U.S. led coalition is justified in declaring war on Iraq (38 percent said yes, 39 percent said no), in Quebec those numbers were 82 percent no and only 18 percent yes. The same poll indicates that twice as many Quebecers (18 percent) would be inclined to boycott U.S. products than Canadians (9 percent).

3. Quebec journalists who in normal times hold views more compatible with anti-globalization and anti-U.S. groups have intensified their bias in the past year. The France-U.S. disputes at the UN and the rise of anti-French sentiment in the U.S. has only deepened the anti-U.S. slant of the French media in Quebec. Moreover, the presence of France in the dispute has increased the percentage of AFP stories and stories taken straight from French publications. La Presse, arguably the most important paper in Quebec, dispatched correspondent Jooned Khan to Baghdad at the beginning of the war; Kahn is well known for his anti-American views and his reporting from Baghdad reflects this bias. He has been regularly contributing first person accounts of casualties, especially civilian. Most of the guests on "Maisonneuve l'coute," one of the most watched news shows in Quebec, are solidly anti-U.S. Last fall, Maisonneuve hosted a Moroccan-born professor, Omar Aktouf, who claimed on the air that Ben Laden had nothing to do with 9-11. Aktouf's comments were unchallenged by Maisonneuve and the other guest, a French h philosophy philosopher Pascal Bruckner. Maisonneuve and RDI, the all news network of the French CBC, continue to host French authors with strong anti-American views.

4. The large Montreal demonstrations against the war -- reported at 25,000 on January 18, 150,000 on February 15 and 200,000 on March 15 -- were organized by an umbrella group called chec la Guerre (Defeat the War). The Group receives the logistical support of the Fdration des Infirmires et Infirmiers du Qubec (FIIQ), the Federation of Quebec Nurses. The FIIQ has a membership of 45,500. (The chec la Guerre web site is actually the FIIQ web site.) Quebec unions tend to be more politicized than their more work place oriented counterparts in other Canadian provinces. They typically have foreign policy positions, and their leaders speak out on behalf of international groups they see as oppressed (i.e. the Palestinians). The Nurses union, for example, has provided assistance to Cuban o Cuban organizations and is financing other international projects.

5. The chec coalition, which assembled 125 groups for its first large march on February 15, has grown to over 200 in the past 6 weeks. Most of these groups have small, sometimes overlapping, memberships. But the coalition also includes large, more well-known groups like the Federation of Quebec Women, Greenpeace, chapters of labor groups such as the Federation des Travailleurs du Quebec, and the Muslim Council of Montreal (itself an umbrella group of some thirty Montreal Muslim organizations.) The official spokesperson of chec la guerre is Francine Nmnh, who is also Director of the Quebec Association of International Development Organisations, an umbrella group of 51 organizations that work in International Development such as Oxfam-Qubec and Mdecins du monde. Nmnh was a delegate at the Summit of the People at the Summit of the Americas. In February, she said that aid that

"this war is illegal and immoral; to participate is to accept the premeditated murder of the Iraqi people."

16. Much has been made of the size of the demonstrations in Montreal. The front page of the tabloid le Journal de Montreal on March 16 screamed, "Record Crowd for Peace: 200,000 People in the Street" (superimposed over a picture of the crowds). La Presse estimated the demonstration at between 100,000 and 200,000 but said Montreal's showing provided "a lesson of pacific solidarity to the rest of the world" where demonstrations on March 16 attracted fewer people than a month earlier. Several TV reports said Montreal had one of the largest demonstrations in the world. The huge numbers of people who came out in cold weather to protest were quickly seized upon by organizers and commentators as indicative of the strength of the Quebec anti-war cause. Bloc Quebecois leader Gilles Duceppe quoted the 250,000 number in the House of Commons as proof of strong public anti-war sentiment. Some said it could be argued that as many as 10 percent of Montrealers were demonstrating (greater Montreal's population is approximately 2.5 million people).

17. However, on Sunday (4/6), Jean-Francois Grenier, President of GeoCom, a site locator company in Montreal, suggested to viewers of the French CBC 5 sur 5 show that the numbers of protestors on March 16 were not more than 49,000. He indicated to post on the phone that 49,000 was a generous interpretation of aerial photos his company had taken of the crowds (leaving open the possibility that some thousands of people had left the protest when the photos were taken). Grenier told us he thought the actual figure, as indicated by the density of the crowds measured in his photos, was likely between 35,000 and 40,000. Geocom made a crowd density assessment for the demonstrations on March 14 at the request of French CBC. Grenier indicated he thought the numbers cited by both the media, demonstration organizers and even the police were way off. (Grenier also questioned the size of demonstrations reported in Europe.) None of the Monday (4/5) papers mentioned the strong possibility that the March 16 crowds had been overestimated nor did CBC French television do much to publicize its new-found information.

18. COMMENT: Regardless of the number of people who attended the peace marches, Quebecers do oppose the war to a greater extent than other Canadians. But because that opposition is greatest among the media and militant anti-globalization groups, perceptions may be skewed. The present anti-war sentiment is widespread in Quebec but we suspect that among the general population, this sentiment does not run as deep as the media and certain politicians have presented it.

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